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### Creating furniture inspired by building a wooden canoe

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## Abstract

Creating Furniture Inspired by Building a Wooden Canoe. This is much more than what the title implies and quite different than what I, the artist, had originally set out to achieve. What it became was an exploration into what motivates me to create and a realization and understanding of my personal aesthetic. Through the process of building a traditional wooden canoe, I explore what it is that motivates me to design and build the objects I create.

Through the successes and failures of the furniture I chose to create, I gained an understanding of the importance of our everyday experiences, and how these experiences big or small shape and mold our personal aesthetics. Everything we do, what we do, how we do it, is ultimately derived from our individual experiences. What motivates me to create is my personal interaction with the natural world, and my personal aesthetic is a culmination of all of my individual experiences.

When I originally began this process, I intended to build a boat and figured that the technical processes involved in building the boat would inspire me to build furniture in a new way. I figured that the inherent characteristics of building, using these new techniques, would further develop my personal aesthetic. What I got from this experience turned out to be a whole lot more.

I am an object maker and my inspiration for the objects I make, and the driving force behind my work, is my personal interaction with the natural world. Whether it is exploring waterways in a handmade wooden boat or hiking snow covered mountains with a snowboard on my back, the feeling is indescribable. The only way I can begin to explain it, is through the objects that I create.

Rochester Institute of Technology

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of  
The College of Imaging Arts and Sciences  
In Candidacy for the Degree of  
Master of Fine Arts

Creating Furniture Inspired by Building a wooden Canoe

By: Brian Bright

approved by: Rich Tannen, Andy Buck, Michael Rogers

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Our everyday experiences, our surroundings, everything we see hear touch and feel, shapes and molds us into the people we are. Every artist, craftsman, or creative soul has a personal aesthetic developed by a culmination of their personal experiences. In many ways everything we do, what we do, and how we do it, is a product of previous experiences. Experiences that we learn from, and make decisions based upon. Experiences that we are inspired by, and make objects based upon.

For the purpose of this thesis, the experience was building a traditional wooden canoe. A body of furniture was designed based upon the ongoing process of building the boat. But the boat was somewhat arbitrary in that it could have been replaced by many other objects. Boats are significant to me, but it's just the beginning, its one of many paths that leads to the same destination. The destination is my personal experience of interacting and exploring what is left of the natural world. The boat could have just as easily been snowshoes or a snowboard. The paths, the experience, the scenery would be different; however the final destination would be the same. I have always favored activities that put me in beautiful surreal places, activities which enabled me to see and experience places and things that I would otherwise never get to see. It has never been good enough for me to simply see things. I need to experience it, be smack dab in the middle, enjoy it, use it, fight it, love it, or hate it; experience not just the beauty but actually interact with it and its many traits. This is what inspires me; this is what motivates me to create. The boat form is a direct product of its interaction with the natural world. Much in the same way my personal aesthetic is a direct product of my interaction with the natural world, and the way in which I choose to interact with it. The way I see things, the forms and shapes and lines that emerge, the way these forms interact with one another. These are the things that remind me of the experience and help me to remember what it felt like to be there.

But not only forms in nature but also from the tools I use to interact with it. Whether it is a boat, snowboard, or snowshoes, these things are an essential part of the experience at hand and much of my aesthetic is derived from them and how they interact with nature. My personal aesthetic is a culmination of many things. It is derived from everything I have experienced and how I have experienced it. For me, my work conveys the feeling of the experience, but I often wonder if it is because I was there and the forms were derived from my personal interaction. I try to convey the feeling as best I can, but I don't believe anyone can truly appreciate my intentions beside myself. Perhaps this is why I often keep my intentions to myself and let the piece be judged on its own merit. The feeling I speak of is one that I can't even begin to explain in words or even pictures, so to think I could truly convey that feeling through a piece of furniture, is some what absurd. My intent with the boat was simply to experience yet another part of the trail on the path that once began with the boat and now begins before the boat; the final destination is the same.

Why a wooden boat? A wooden boat has tradition. There is a history to wood, used since the beginning of time for everything from crude tools and weapons to fine furniture; perhaps the most accessible and diverse material. There is an undeniable beauty to a wooden boat and it's a fine wooden object that everyone, regardless of age, education, or class, can understand and appreciate. For me it made sense; the idea of building a wooden canoe. This would be an undertaking which would test my abilities as a woodworker and ultimately would result in the creation of a beautiful handmade wooden object. This object, when complete will help me to explore and enjoy the solitude, serenity, and natural beauty of places I would otherwise never be able to see. Allow me to see the world from yet another angle and enable me to experience more of the path. By further developing the experience, I ultimately further developed my personal aesthetic, as well as a new understanding of it. This is what I hope is ultimately translated into the finished body of work.



The final pieces designed themselves. In many ways they were a direct product

of the experience. Although this was my intention, I was still a bit surprised at how well it worked. I designed and built pieces while simultaneously building the boat. The pieces I designed were reactions to an experience in progress rather than afterthoughts of fading memories. This made the design process much easier. The finished pieces are a culmination of the experience of building the boat and my former experiences of interacting with the natural world, which I have realized is the basis of my personal aesthetic. My intentions from the beginning were well set up and spelled out. The process was controlled and what I was creating was extremely relevant to my life and my personal interests. I believed that everything was so well set up, that the pieces just fell in place. When it came to it, I wasn't struggling to design. Every part of every piece was a direct product of its relationship to another part, and to the overall design of the previous piece. The overall process felt very natural to me, like everything was second nature. For me, the most challenging part was trying to convey the feeling of the experience in a subtle enough way as not to distract from the object its self. This experience greatly helped me to further understand my personal aesthetic and helped me realize what it is that inspires me. I believe that this new understanding made the process easier and more natural. I believe that I was able to use my personal aesthetic to my advantage.

The first piece I designed was a coffee table. This piece was inspired by the strong back and form for the boat. This skeletal structure intrigued me. I made connections to animals, people, airplanes, and even houses. I was intrigued by the idea of celebrating the inner structure as opposed to covering it up and I liked the idea of creating a complex form out of simple shapes.



I set out to repeat a two-dimensional shape in order to create a three dimensional form, which accomplished much in the same way as the boat. The imagery of the piece



suggests many sources: rocks jutting out from the surface of the water, mountains piercing through the clouds, trees in the fog. The design has somewhat of a dangerous theme, the gentle curves coming together and terminating in sharp points is somewhat off putting. The table is intriguing and somewhat mysterious; you are drawn to it in order to learn more but you are aware of its danger. My personal interaction with the natural world is much the same. I am drawn in by its beauty and its mystery but I respect its power and I am aware of its danger.



When you view the finished piece from different angles it is somewhat of an optical illusion. Although it is perfectly symmetrical, when viewed at an angle from any side, it appears to be leaning almost jolting towards you. I found it quite interesting

how your eyes can perceive something quite differently than it is. I became fascinated by the idea that shifting planes in space shifts how you perceive reality. I immediately made the association between this and the reflections off the water. The distorted images of the natural world, myself, the compound curves of the boat I was in, the reflections of the rising sun off the water, the feeling of sticking the paddle in and disturbing this parallel reality.



The first piece was successful in many ways. It set the tone for the rest of the pieces; and provided insight into my relationship with the natural world and what

it is that inspires me. Conceptually, I was able to convey a lot of information and feeling through this design, without it distracting from the overall piece.

The second piece of furniture proved to be the most technically challenging piece of the group. Inspired by the compound curves of the newly stripped sections of the boat partially hiding the complex inner skeleton, I set out to create a cabinet with the same feel. With the first piece I chose not to incorporate any technical processes derived from building the boat, but instead chose to concentrate on what the boat represented to me. With the second piece I wanted to design a piece based on technical processes derived from the boat building experience. I designed a cabinet that would have to be built in the same fashion as the boat. In order to create the bent panels, a complex inner skeleton much like the form for the boat was created so that the individual slats would join together and create the desired form. Using the bead and cove system from the boat, I was able to create large bent panels out of many narrow tapered pieces of wood. When these curved, tapered panels were placed on complex angles which your eyes see as complex curves. When these curves are placed with other pieces curving in opposite directions on separate planes, the result is a cabinet with the look of compound, complex curves and the feel of a hull of a wooden boat.





Much like the first table, the severe tapers and multiple curves on compound angles form optical illusions. When the curved doors open and are viewed straight on, they appear to be severely angled; when in fact they are one of the few parts that are not. Once again, I was reminded of the reflections off the glassy water and the distorted images of shifting planes in space.



Overall the piece was successful and I accomplished what I set out to do. However I realized that it needed more of the feeling that the first piece captured. As I said before, the first piece set the tone for the ones to come. I feel that this piece exceeded the standards set by the first piece as far as technicality and craftsmanship; however it fell short when it came to the conceptual aspects. The pieces together compliment one another without being dependent upon one another. They don't appear to be part of a matched set but at the same time they stand together as well, if not better, then they stand alone.



The third piece would be a bench. I began to think about placing the finished

boat in the water for the first time. I thought about taking that first stroke and feeling the boat glide through the glassy water. The bench was designed with these things in mind. For the bench, I was no longer concerned with celebrating the inner structure. The inner skeleton of this piece would remain as part of the piece but completely hidden. The overall design was inspired by the motion of a paddle through the water, with the bench top representing the surface of the water. The form was once again stripped to create a similar feel to that of the boat, this was not meant to directly represent the canoe but simply make a technical reference to it



The bench form was picked because of its length and its size. The long narrow format and large size would be ideal to accentuate the curves and allow enough room to truly push the angles while still remaining stable. The Idea was a direct spin off from the table and the cabinet. The plan was to once again make stripped, curved panels, and place these panels into a piece at compound angles. In the previous pieces, this similar format resulted in somewhat awkward optical illusions in the finished piece. The intention for the bench was to create an object in which the optical illusions enhanced the desired effect and resulted in a simple, yet dramatic piece with no awkward views.





As you move around the finished bench, the view is constantly changing. Convex curves on one side become dramatic concave curves on the other side. The edge treatment for the bench top is a tapered rolling bevel which is constantly changing as you move around the piece. All of the individual slats are severely tapered enhancing the angles and adding to the desired effect. The large tapered curved bench top adds a sense of movement on an alternate plane and references the motion of a paddle through the water.

I was pleased with the way this piece turned out. I was able to use the optical illusions to my advantage and create a piece with no awkward views.

I feel that I was able to convey a lot of information through a relatively simple form, without it distracting from the overall piece. This piece was a direct spin off from the previous cabinet. For me, it picked up where the cabinet left off and made up for what I felt was missing.

The last piece of the group is strictly conceptual. As I stated early, our everyday experiences shape us and mold us into the people we are. These experiences are the basis for our personal aesthetics, the reflection of the maker in the finished piece. The final piece was a mirror and was meant to represent this reflection. At this point in the process, I was somewhat limited for time and rushed the design process on the mirror. I made some bad design decisions and it resulted in a piece that was less than ideal for my purposes. The piece stood alone as a nice object and conveyed a lot of feeling and information, however it was too literal and the imagery distracted from the piece. The overall design was not cohesive with the rest of the body of work. Because of these reasons, I decided to eliminate it and design another mirror to take its place



All of the pieces I make are in some way a reflection of me and of the many experiences in my life. Everything I see, hear, touch, and feel. This final piece was meant to celebrate this connection. The overall design of the new mirror is composed of two parts, one which is flat, and one that is curved once again creating multiple planes. The shape of the final piece was inspired by the shape of a paddle; the paddle being the physical connection between man and water, a direct reference to my personal interaction with nature, as well as to the boat. The final piece is a wall-hung mirror with a single small shelf. This small shelf is a representation of me alone in the natural world, complete solitude, finally a time for reflection. In many ways this piece is also a reflection of this entire body of work. Subtleties in its form and the materials chosen, indirectly reference the previous pieces. While its overall design, simplicity and combination of multiple woods, allows it to stand alone on its own merits.

When I originally began this process I intended to build a boat and figured that the technical processes involved in building the boat would inspire me to build furniture in a new way. I figured that the inherent characteristics of building, using these new techniques, would further develop my personal aesthetic. What I got from this experience turned out to be a whole lot more. I was forced to explore what it is that truly inspires me and what it is that motivates me to create. I realized how important our everyday experiences are in developing our personal aesthetics and I specifically realized a whole new understanding of mine. This new understanding holds endless possibilities for the future. My experiences exploring the natural world have led me to some of the most beautiful sites that I have ever seen. It is only when I am completely emerged in the mountains, the rivers, and in the woods that I truly feel at ease. I am inspired by its beauty, mystery, power, and the complete solitude and serenity that I feel when I am there. I am an object maker and my inspiration

for the objects I make, and the driving force behind my work is this personal interaction. Whether it is exploring waterways in a handmade wooden boat or hiking snow covered mountains with a snowboard on my back, the feeling is indescribable. The only way I can begin to explain it is through the objects that I create.



